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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000058

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: EDITOR CITES IMPROVED US-TURKEY RELATIONS;  
PREDICTS CRISIS OVER DOMESTIC ISLAMIC THREAT

REF: ANKARA 0171

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary and comment. Aksam daily newspaper editor-in-chief Serdar Turgut expressed optimism regarding improved U.S.-Turkish relations while lamenting a lack of press freedom in Turkey during a January 24 meeting with the Consul General. Turgut was particularly concerned for his country's future, convinced the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is paving the way to Islamic rule, something he believed the military establishment could not accept but did not yet know how to counter. Though Turgut is widely considered to typify Aksam's sensationalist tendencies, his opinions are not uncommon and are particularly relevant as like-minded individuals prepare to face government attempts to push through Constitutional amendments which would allow headscarves in universities. End summary and comment.

#### US-Turkey Relations

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12. (C) During a January 24 meeting with the Consul General, mainstream Aksam daily newspaper editor-in-chief Serdar Turgut discussed U.S.-Turkish relations, GOT efforts to combat the PKK, lack of media freedom and the controversial headscarf issue, among other subjects. Noting he had accompanied PM Erdogan on his November 2007 trip to Washington, Turgut beamed as he recounted the Prime Minister's meeting with President Bush. "President Bush said the PKK is the enemy of the United States...I saw his face, he meant it," exclaimed Turgut. Pointing out that the President's remark reflected long-standing USG policy, Consul General concluded that prior anti-U.S. sentiment in Turkey was likely governed by the (mis)perception of policy rather than the policy itself. Turgut agreed, acknowledging he had heard other officials state similar positions but that it makes a difference when it comes directly from the President.

13. (C) Consul General expressed concern for the long term effect of negative perceptions of the United States on young people who had not witnessed the U.S.-Turkish relationship weather numerous challenges as a result of a strong Cold War strategic alliance. Turgut observed that for young Turks, there were two stories about the United States: one cultural, which they love; and one political, which is fed to them by the Islamist press and has tended to be negative but is improving. Turks make a distinction between USG policy and the American people, whom they generally find to be "nice," added Turgut.

14. (C) Turgut lamented his parliament's March 1, 2003 failure to authorize a U.S. invasion of Iraq from the north,

believing the vote had cost Turkey significantly. Without going into specifics, he speculated Turkey would eventually "take control" in Iraq once the U.S. steps out. Turgut noted he had written about this theory and had yet to hear an argument against it. Consul General avoided the bait and proffered that business opportunities will increase as Iraq stabilizes.

#### 2009 Local Elections key to PKK Problem

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15. (C) Returning his attention to the terrorist PKK, Turgut contended the problem will be solved in Turkey and not in Iraq. "The government knows this," he elaborated. The 2009 local elections will be very important. The ruling AKP wants to win cities like Diyarbakir, traditionally controlled by PKK sympathizers. In this respect, Turgut observed, the AKP and the military have a shared objective which could lead to less friction between them if the military can get over its fear of the party's trend toward "moderate Islam."

#### The GOT's Islamic Agenda and Press Restrictions

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16. (C) In response to Consul General's observation that the term "moderate Islam" can be controversial in Turkey, Turgut stated he had first heard the term used by an American official before the first Gulf War. Acknowledging he is not "religious," the editor claimed he had never personally seen an example of "moderate" Islam and did not believe in the concept. In his view, the headscarf issue (reftel) is very dangerous for Turkey and an indicator of the government's plan to completely re-orient the country to Islam. Remarking Iran had gone through an "identical" transition, Turgut

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argued the AKP would not respect the need to keep religion separate from politics. As a result, many people are thinking about leaving the country. Though it did not yet know how to deal with it, the Army would not be able to accept this threat and the situation will result in a crisis, concluded Turgut.

17. (C) Turgut further bemoaned the lack of press freedom in Turkey. He argued that the Turkish press is dominated by two powerful media interests: the Dogan group and Sabah (recently sold to the Calik Holding company but still under GOT control pending approval of the sale by the government's Radio and Television Oversight Committee, RTUK) and that Aksam was the only significant player remaining between them. Because media groups have other business interests, they are vulnerable to outside influence on editorial policies, explained Turgut. He offered as an example Aksam's parent company, the Cukurova group, which also has a controlling interest in Turkey's largest mobile phone network Turkcell. Turgut pointed out that Turkcell is currently facing problems with Russia that only the GOT can solve. On a more personal level, Turgut alleged, "If you write something against the government, you get a direct harsh response," contending the most senior government officials will "call you or your boss." Asked to elaborate, he said the Prime Minister himself had, on occasion, called his boss to complain about things Aksam had published.

18. (C) Looking to the future, Turgut predicted the AKP would win 2009 local elections in Diyarbakir and that it also stood to gain in traditional leftist centers such as Izmir and the Cankaya district of Ankara. He lamented the absence of social democrats in Turkey, arguing the country needed a social democratic party in the "European sense." Though he claimed to have supported the AKP before it came to power in 2002, he expressed concern that people don't see that it is now, foremost, an Islamist Party. Noting that his outlook for his country constantly shifted between highs and lows, he admitted to currently being a pessimist; he is grateful his son is an American citizen because of the opportunities that

would afford him.

WIENER